



*Blind service personnel undergoing occupational therapy at Naval Hospital Philadelphia, 1945. (Photo from BUMED Archives)*

## THE STORY OF SGT. SCHMID AND NAVY MEDICINE'S REHABILITATION OF THE BLIND IN WORLD WAR II

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For thousands of World War II veterans wounded during the conflict, the war's end was only the beginning of a long and trying road to recovery. Al Schmid was one of these veterans.

The 22-year old Marine from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had served at Guadalcanal when fighting was at its bloodiest. On August 21, 1942, while manning a machine gun nest at the Tenaru River, Schmid almost single-handedly kept an enemy assault in check before a grievous wound took him out of the fight.[i]

Schmid's heroic actions earned him a Navy Cross, and his story would inspire a bestselling book by Roger Butterfield and the Warner Brothers film *Pride of the Marines*. But underneath the fanfare and glory of that heroic act lay the fact that Schmid lost his left eye and left virtually blinded in his remaining eye.

Just as Schmid was returning stateside for treatment, Naval Hospital Philadelphia was developing a first-of-its-kind rehabilitation program for blinded Sailors and Marines. This program targeted men like Schmid who suffered bilateral blindness as the result of combat, disease and/or accident.

The program emphasized the importance of early rehabilitative measures, re-education, social adjustment, counselling, and pre-vocational training—all designed to “restore the patient's confidence and

to further [their] self-sufficiency.”[ii]

The Philadelphia program was run by the hospital’s senior ophthalmologist who, after examining each patient, coordinated care with a team of occupational and physical therapists and technicians. A hospital corpsman was assigned to each patient serving as what was termed a “teacher-attendant”—teaching them how to eat, walk with a cane, how to dress themselves, take care of personal belongings, identify money, and maintain personal hygiene. The teacher-attendant would also guide them through the entire rehabilitation process.[iii]

Each patient was required to undergo an intensive course of study in Braille and also given 36 lessons in typing.[iv] Patients were taught physical coordination and encouraged to take part in a host of athletic activities like calisthenics, rowing, bowling, archery, swimming, and various gymnastic games. Blinded Sailors and Marines also had an opportunity to play a form of baseball that relied on sound and vocal direction. As part of social readjustment, all patients were encouraged to attend social functions (e.g., dances, holiday parties, etc.) in the hospital, at private homes and places of entertainment.

*(Story continues below)*



*Sgt. Al Schmid while at Naval Hospital Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1943. (Photo courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Division)*

The veterans undergoing rehabilitation were all in the prime of their lives. From January 1943—when Schmid was admitted into the program—until November 1945, a total of 157 bilaterally blind patients were treated at Naval Hospital Philadelphia. Ninety-nine (or 63 percent) had become blind as the result of external trauma. Of these, 79 were Marines and 20 were Sailors whose ages ranged from 19 to 40. Some 88 percent of the 79 Marines were blinded as the result of land combat while 50 percent of Sailors were injured in action at sea.[v]

Rehabilitation could be a difficult process for both patient and caregiver. Some of the veterans were in the throes of depression and anger, others overcompensated for their injuries before accepting the so-called “reorientation process.”[vi]

Medical personnel who first encountered Schmid remembered him as struggling with the stigma of blindness. On an occasion when an American Foundation for the Blind representative gave Schmid a Braille wrist watch he refused the gift stating it best be given to someone who was actually blind.[vii]

Schmid would later remark that when he returned from the Pacific: “my body was full of shrapnel and I was blind—that was the toughest part, the blindness. I lay there in the hospital and I didn’t give a damn about anything. I didn’t even want to live.”[viii]

The rehabilitation process at Philadelphia was highly individualized and adapted to meet the needs as well as the psychological and emotional states of each patient. But patients were not given much time to dwell on their physical states.



*Naval Hospital Philadelphia, ca. 1940s. In World War II, the hospital would become one of the Navy's premier rehabilitation hospital for blind service personnel as well as amputees and the deaf. (Photo from BUMED Archives)*

Although schedules of activities would vary, a typical day could be organized as follows: 0830 – physical reconditioning; 0930 – typing; 1030 – music (e.g, learning the piano); 1300 – orientation and travel; 1400 – Braille; 1500 – occupational therapy. Occupational therapy could include everything from woodworking and weaving to baking and even operating the register at the hospital’s Ship Services Store.

[ix]

Vocational counseling and pre-vocational training were cornerstones of the program. One wounded Marine who worked as a carpenter before the war was engaged in constructing typing tables and later

employed at a local hardware plant; others were involved with leather work, gardening and even developing x-rays.[x]

Navy dentist Cmdr. Roger Gerry and occupational therapist Lt. (j.g.) Faith Koch instructed blind personnel on the processing of dental x-rays and created the position of “blind dark-room technician.” Several of these patients who developed an aptitude for this work would later be employed as dark-room technicians at other military and civilian hospitals. As Koch explained, “Since this work is done in a dark room and is timed, no sight is necessary for the job. Braille markers on film racks and matching marked envelopes for the film are used. The blind technician uses an ordinary timer with the face covering removed and the numbers marked with dots. After the film is processed, it is hung on the rack to dry overnight and the following day films are replaced in the matching envelopes.”[xi]

In their final two weeks of the program, patients were sent to the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind for vocational aptitude testing and psychological evaluation to see how they were progressing. Each of the blinded veterans at Philadelphia would remain on active duty until completing the rehabilitation program. Once discharged they would be placed into care of the Veterans Administration.

Schmid was discharged from Philadelphia Naval Hospital in 1944 increasingly hopeful of his future. In an interview that same year with the *Los Angeles Examiner*, Schmid would state: "I'd like to tell the other fellows who come back all bunged up, maybe with an arm or a leg missing, that it doesn't mean the end. I learned that the hard way." [xii]

### Postscript

While still a patient at Naval Hospital Philadelphia Schmid married his girlfriend Ruth Hartley. They had two children together—the first was born at the Naval Hospital Philadelphia while Schmid was still undergoing treatment. After his discharge, Schmid would become involved in politics and run for local office. He would regain partial sight in his remaining eye and go on to lead an active life, even taking up hobbies like fishing and playing the organ before his death in 1982. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. [xiii]

On July 1, 1944, the Navy officially designated the Naval Hospital Philadelphia as the center for all bilateral blind patients in the Navy and Marine Corps, a status it held until the last blind patient was discharged from the hospital in 1946. The naval hospital would serve as Navy's premier rehabilitation hospital on the East Coast through the Vietnam War for amputees and those suffering a loss of hearing. The changing needs of the Navy and the consolidation of hospital services would eventually reduce the need for the hospital. It was closed in 1991.

### Endnotes.

[i] Butterfield, Roger. *Al Schmid, Marine*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1944.

[ii] Price, RW. "Account of the U.S. Naval Hospital, Philadelphia, PA from 7 December 1941 to 31 August 1945." *The United States Navy Medical Department Historical Data Series, World War II: Shore Stations*, Vol. 13, 1946.

[iii] Swanson, CA and RA Stewart. "Blindness." *The History of the Medical Department of the United States Navy in World War II: A Narrative and Pictorial Volume*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1950.

[iv] Upon completing the course and attaining some proficiency in grade 2 Braille, each patient was given a portable Braille typewriter as a gift.

[v] Beam, AD. "Traumatic Blindness." *Rehabilitation at the Naval Hospital Philadelphia. Supplement to the United States Naval Medical Bulletin*. March 1946.

[vi] Swanson, CA and RA Stewart. "Blindness."

[vii] Gerber, DA. "In Search of Al Schmid, Blinded Veteran, Everyman." *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, April 1995. ^

[viii] Stone, Jack. "Wounded Hero Tells Buddies to 'Carry On.'" *The Los Angeles Examiner*, July 30, 1944.

[ix] Kugler, ME. "Re-education of the Newly Blinded." *Rehabilitation at the Naval Hospital Philadelphia. Supplement to the United States Naval Medical Bulletin*. March 1946.

[x] Koch, FC. "Occupational Therapy." *Rehabilitation at the Naval Hospital Philadelphia. Supplement to the United States Naval Medical Bulletin*. March 1946.

[xi] Ibid, p300.

[xii] Stone.

[xiii] Gerber, DA.